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ABSTRACT

This article argues that students are not receiving a high quality social studies education and are not being prepared for citizenship in a democracy; that the most serious failings of social studies courses are conceptual, philosophical, and ideological, and that what social studies experts want students to learn is not what parents and other citizens expect them to learn. An irony in the current trend toward global education is, that it permits teachers to forget that one of the biggest curricular reforms of the 1920s and 1930s was the "expanding environment" approach, whereby children were taught concepts of self, families, schools, neighborhoods, and regional environments before taking up such vast considerations as the oneness of all humankind with which the globalists would now have them begin. An emphasis on reflective decision-making is criticized for its failure to promote the learning of social studies facts. The few social studies-related courses that most school systems require will not endow future citizenry with informed political visions. California is lauded for its recent social studies curriculum guide, "The History-Social Science Framework," that combines history, geography, and civics into a 12-year sequence promoting the teaching of democratic values. (JHP)

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AMONG THE EDUCATIONALOIDS: THE SOCIAL STUDIES DEBACLE

by

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THE SOCIAL STUDIES DEBACLE

The great dismal swamp of today's school curriculum is not reading or writing, not math or science, not even foreign language study. It is social studies, a field that has been getting slimier and more tangled ever since it changed its name from "history" around 1916. It is also a subject students seldom like, and one that is doing a wretched job of forging historically knowledgeable citizens with a passion for democracy.

Consider some recent evidence:

•Nearly half the high school seniors tested in Baltimore in 1987 could not find the United States on a world map.

•Half the 400 undergraduates enrolling in their first college-level geography course at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 1984 could not find Japan or the Middle East on a world map. One in three could not locate Europe.

•Barely half of American eleventh graders in 1976 knew that each state elects two U.S. senators (and just 35 percent knew the circumstance in which a state might have more senators than representatives).

•On the first-ever national assessment of students' knowledge of American history, conducted in early 1986, Diane Ravitch and I discovered that two-thirds of all high school juniors do not know when Lincoln was President or when the Civil War was fought, and that more than half lack basic understanding of the Constitution, *The Federalist*, the *Dred Scott* decision, the Emancipation Proclamation, Senator Joseph McCarthy, the Scopes trial, Jim Crow and Reconstruction. Bear in mind: eleventh grade is the customary year for studying U.S. history, and four-fifths of the youngsters taking part in this assessment were then enrolled in such courses.

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In education, when discontented with the outcomes, we can usually blame the delivery system: such familiar flaws as scanty, mindless homework; puerile textbooks; ill-prepared teachers; slack standards and low expectations. The field of social studies certainly partakes of all these transmission glitches. But the most serious failings of social studies are conceptual, philosophical, even ideological. Simply stated, what most "experts" in the field want students to learn is not what most parents and citizens expect them to know.

In fact, knowledge itself is in some peril. It was but one of five categories in a 1981 "Statement on Essentials" produced by the primary professional organization in this field, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). And under this heading, as much emphasis was given to knowledge about economics, social institutions, intergroup and interpersonal relationships, and "world-wide relationships of all sorts" as to geography, government, and the "history and culture of our nation and the world." In any case, transmission of knowledge is not the overriding goal of social studies, according to another influential NCSS statement adopted in 1983. Rather, the main objective is "to prepare young people to identify, understand and work to solve the problems that face our increasingly diverse nation and interdependent world."

The notion of "interdependency" recurs throughout the writings and speeches of leaders in this field. Small wonder that youngsters wind up not knowing much about the history of the United States or the lore of Western civilization. The social studies *avant garde* regards any such curricular orientation as reactionary and chauvinistic. In his presidential address to the NCSS in November 1987, Florida International University professor Jan Tucker warned against the "nationalization of knowledge" and termed "global interdependence" "the most formidable challenge to social studies in the United States today and tomorrow." He de-

voted the rest of an impassioned lecture to distinguishing between the "territorial state" and the "trading state." The former, which Tucker branded an archaic concept needing to be expunged from American classrooms, "depends upon the direct control of territory and military strength to provide security and well-being for its citizens." In the trading state, by contrast, "strength is derived from a nation's successful participation in an interdependent global trading network." Teaching this view of world affairs means "recogniz[ing] the interests of other nations and peoples as authentic. In the trading state, a fundamental cultural reciprocity must be assumed."

Remember that we are not here considering the curriculum of a liberal arts college or graduate business school. We are examining what will be taught to eight- and fifteen-year-olds, to boys and girls who are apt to know little save what they learn in school. Cultural reciprocity isn't easy if you've no idea what a culture is or of what your own consists.

Today's fashionable notions in social studies did not result from some abrupt shift in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era—though doubtless the leftward tilt and relativistic tendencies of many contemporary teachers are associated with their having come of age in the 1960s and seventies. Rather, what we are seeing is the accumulation of some seventy years of curricular and pedagogical revisionism. In fact there is some irony in the "global" orientation of today's reformers, who would have youngsters start by understanding the oneness of all humankind before turning to matters more specific to themselves and their nation. For one of the big curriculum reforms of the 1920s and thirties was the introduction into elementary school social studies of the "expanding environments" approach, whereby children are first taught about themselves, their families, their schools and neighborhoods, only gradually—as the child got older—widening the perspective to include more distant places and unfamiliar folk. One might think of today's reformers as aficionados of "contracting environments," moving from the universal to the particular.

Often, though, the particulars are never reached. That is why our youngsters' minds are filled with so little real information. Following Dewey's lead, many educators disdain "mere knowledge." For them, the supreme goal of schooling is "problem solving," and nowhere is this more apparent than in social studies. Consider James A. Banks's popular manual for teachers of this field, which starts by stipulating that the overriding goal of a "modern social studies curriculum" is to help "students develop the ability to make reflective decisions." As for knowledge, Banks writes, "traditional social studies curricula emphasize the mastery of low-level facts, such as the names of rivers, capital cities and important dates." That tradition must now be rooted out and replaced by a "focus on higher levels of knowledge rather than on facts."

Even as social studies has become a grab bag of current events, crass social science, one-worldism, and opinion-mongering by uninformed children and half-informed adults, it has not played a very large role in the education of young Americans. Elementary school teachers typically spend only minutes a day on it, and if there is need to eke out more time for reading or math, those minutes may be sacrificed. Nor does the subject loom large in high school. The average 1982 graduate had accumulated just 2.6 course credits in social studies (out of 21 total credits during four years of high school). Besides the American history course that most schools require during the junior year, the paltry requirements in social studies can usually be satisfied by such electives as urban ecology, investment economics, criminology, energy education, violence in America, even "Singles Living" and "A Celebration of Life" (which turns out to include units on "death education," one of today's trendiest topics).

If the food is tainted, one might respond, it's just as well the portions are small. Why should more time and care be lavished on a subject that as currently taught ranges from trivial and ineffectual to mischievous and damaging?

It's a risk, no doubt about it. But an ignorant populace is at least as worrisome. That is why in effect we have to fight a two-front war: to purge the field of goofiness and reconceptualize its content *and then* to see that more of it is taught. To be learned as well as taught, however, social studies needs to be allowed to be interesting. Certainly the subject matter is inherently fascinating: full of triumphs and tragedies, heroes and villains, exotic places and strange happenings. But we learn from eleventh graders who took part in the 1986 assessment that today's typical history class is deathly dull: lectures by teachers and readings from vast, plodding textbooks chosen because everything imaginable is "mentioned" but nothing controversial is broached. Seldom is their pattern relieved by class discussion, individual projects, original source materials, or field trips.

Even if soundly conceived and imaginatively taught, no single year course in American history can do much more than scratch the surface of this sprawling subject, let alone the other history that we want our children to learn: ancient civilizations, medieval and Renaissance Europe, modern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. And what of geography? Of where the Nile and Amazon rivers flow, of why the poles are ice-capped, of the routes taken by great explorers and where vast human migrations went from and to?

Then there is civics, in many respects the most difficult of these subjects to teach because here the convictions that students acquire are as important as the information they imbibe. It is relatively simple (and none too exhilarating) to instruct them in the differences between bicameral and unicameral legislatures, the workings of the electoral college, and the theory of federalism. But will youngsters ingest a suitable blend of tolerance for human differences (race, religion) and intolerance for certain human behavior (cheating, treason, slothfulness, greed)? Will they absorb not only the theoretical differences between democracy and totalitarianism but also a deep devotion to the former and a horror of the latter?

Here the problem with the social studies establishment is its relentless relativism. When NCSS president Tucker warns against the "territorial state" and the "nationalization of knowledge," he is cautioning against any clear preference for one political or social system over another. When Professor Banks exhorts social studies teachers to expunge the "traditional" approach, with its "development of a tenacious and non-reflective nationalism," and replace it with a "clarified and reflective identification with the world community," he is signalling his own convictions. If the leaders of this field do not themselves believe that democracy is the best of all known systems by which to organize a society and a polity, then it isn't likely that fourteen-year-olds studying this subject will end up thinking that.

A recent episode is illuminating. Last spring 150 prominent Americans signed a manifesto called *Education for Democracy*. Beginning with the premise that the survival of democracy "depends on our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans—and a deep loyalty to the political institutions our founders put together to fulfill that vision," it called for the schools to become far more purposeful in imparting to all youngsters the knowledge and attitudes necessary for "an informed, reasoned allegiance to the ideals of a free society."

This clear and rather pointed statement was endorsed by public figures across the political spectrum: by George Will and Mary Futrell, by Ann Landers and Bill Bennett, by Walter Mondale and Gerald Ford, by Anthony Podesta and Jeane Kirkpatrick, by Albert Shanker and Orrin Hatch. It was about as close as it is possible to come to an expression of national consensus concerning the teaching of democracy. But a few months later, in the pages of the NCSS journal, *Social Education*, it was denounced for "nationalistic bias clothed in democratic rhetoric." Since only NCSS members take their journal seriously, the manifesto continues to resonate elsewhere. But don't expect the social studies classes in most American schools to heed it any time soon.

One bright spot in this bleak landscape is California, where in mid-1987 the state board of education adopted a new curricular "framework" that combines history, geography, and civics into a twelve-year sequence that also pays close attention to democratic values, to reasoning and thinking skills, and to such worthwhile social sciences as economics.

Because the new framework will influence both state testing and textbook adoption, it is apt to be quite influential throughout our most populous state. But it was no small task to forge the consensus embodied in it. Some participants wanted to change nothing. Others pressed for special treatment within the curriculum for one or another issue, ethnic group, or viewpoint. The necessary clout came mainly from state education chief Bill Honig, who has placed curricular renewal at the top of his agenda and who values historical knowledge, takes democracy seriously, and prizes cultural literacy for all youngsters, not just the college-bound. The panel convened by Honig included some real historians, old-fashioned readers, unreconstructed patriots, and hardy trench fighters. It took many hours of debate, and some wounded egos and unfriendly feelings are said to linger in the vicinity of Sacramento. But the result was worth it.

If a state like California—and states are where most important curricular choices get made—can achieve agreement on a new approach to social studies, why can't the others? In most, alas, there is no counterpart to Honig and the social studies establishment remains enamored of process, problem solving, and globalism. Although there has recently been established an unwieldy 44-member "national commission" that is supposed to spend several years and many philanthropic dollars scrutinizing the entire field, the NCSS is its primary organizational sponsor and many of its members are leaders of the old guard. This field, in other words, is probably incapable of reforming itself. Risky though it is to urge governors, legislators, business leaders, and other laymen to engage themselves in curricular decisions, sometimes a severe jolt from outside the education establishment is the only alternative to entropy. Meanwhile, most children are emerging from most schools with only a light dusting of history, geography, and civics. □